

**RESOLUTION 2012-15**  
**HIGHLANDS WATER PROTECTION AND PLANNING COUNCIL:**  
**APPROVAL OF THE PETITION FOR PLAN CONFORMANCE FOR**  
**THE TOWNSHIP OF VERNON, SUSSEX COUNTY**

**WHEREAS**, the New Jersey Highlands Region (Highlands Region) is an area of over 859,000 acres that consists of 88 municipalities in parts of seven counties – Bergen, Hunterdon, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, Sussex and Warren; and

**WHEREAS**, the New Jersey Legislature found that the Highlands Region is an essential source of drinking water, providing clean and plentiful drinking water for one-half of the population of the State of New Jersey, and also contains other exceptional natural resources such as clean air, contiguous forest lands, agricultural lands, wetlands, pristine watersheds, and habitat for fauna and flora, as well as sites of historic significance and recreational opportunities; and

**WHEREAS**, the Legislature found that the Highlands Region also provides a desirable quality of life and place where people live and work, that it is important to ensure the economic viability of Highlands communities and that residential, commercial, and industrial development, redevelopment, and economic growth in certain appropriate areas of the Highlands are also in the best interests of all the citizens of the State, providing innumerable social, cultural, and economic benefits and opportunities; and

**WHEREAS**, the Legislature found that the Highlands Region contains agricultural lands in active production and that these lands are important resources of the State that should be preserved, that the agricultural industry in the Region is a vital component of the economy, welfare, and cultural landscape of the Garden State and that maintenance of agricultural production and a positive agricultural business climate should be encouraged to the maximum extent possible; and

**WHEREAS**, the Legislature found that the pace of development in the Highlands Region has dramatically increased, that the Region, because of its proximity to rapidly expanding suburban areas, is at serious risk of being fragmented and consumed by unplanned development and that the existing land use and environmental regulation system cannot protect the water and natural resources of the Highlands against the environmental impacts of sprawl development; and

**WHEREAS**, deeming protection of the Highlands Region an issue of State level importance, the Legislature enacted the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, N.J.S.A. 13:20-1 et seq. (Highlands Act), to establish a regional approach to land use planning for the Highlands Region to replace the uncoordinated land use decisions of 88 municipalities, seven counties and a myriad of private landowners; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Act delineates two areas in the Highlands Region: a Preservation Area, containing approximately 415,000 acres, and a Planning Area, containing approximately 444,000 acres; and

**WHEREAS**, the Legislature created a public body corporate and politic with corporate succession known as the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Council (Highlands Council) to advance a new regional approach to land use planning and to prepare a Regional Master Plan to protect and enhance the significant values of the Highlands resources throughout the entire Highlands Region; and

**WHEREAS**, the Preservation Area is an area with exceptional natural resource value that should be subject to stringent water and natural resource protection standards, policies, planning and regulation; and

**WHEREAS**, the Planning Area is the area outside of the Preservation Area that should likewise be part of a comprehensive planning approach that serves to protect the water and other significant resources of the entire Highlands Region while also accommodating appropriate patterns of development, redevelopment and economic growth; and

**WHEREAS**, the Legislature found that such a new regional approach to land use planning shall be

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complemented by increased standards more protective of the environment established by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) for development in the Preservation Area of the Highlands; and

**WHEREAS**, the Legislature found that this comprehensive approach should be guided, in heart, mind, and spirit, by an abiding and generously given commitment to protecting the incomparable water resources and natural beauty of the New Jersey Highlands so as to preserve them intact, in trust, forever for the pleasure, enjoyment, and use of future generations while also providing every conceivable opportunity for appropriate economic growth and development to advance the quality of life of the residents of the Highlands Region and the entire State; and

**WHEREAS**, Sections 8 and 10 of the Highlands Act mandate that the Highlands Council prepare and adopt the Regional Master Plan with the goal of protecting and enhancing the significant values of the resources in the Highlands Region; and

**WHEREAS**, Section 10 of the Highlands Act establishes goals for the Regional Master Plan for both the Preservation Area and Planning Area, including to protect, restore, and enhance the quality and quantity of the waters of the Highlands, to preserve environmentally sensitive lands, to preserve lands needed for recreation and conservation, to promote brownfield remediation and redevelopment, to preserve farmland, historic sites and other historic resources, to preserve outdoor recreation opportunities, to promote water resource conservation, and to promote compatible agricultural, horticultural, recreational, and cultural uses and opportunities; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Act establishes development goals in the Preservation Area, to prohibit or limit, to the maximum extent possible, construction or development which is incompatible with the Preservation Area; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Act establishes development goals in the Planning Area, to encourage, consistent with the State Development and Redevelopment Plan and smart growth strategies and principles, appropriate patterns of compatible residential, commercial, and industrial development, redevelopment, and economic growth, in or adjacent to areas already utilized for such purposes, and to discourage piecemeal, scattered, and inappropriate development, in order to accommodate local and regional growth and economic development in an orderly way while protecting the Highlands environment from individual and cumulative adverse impacts; and

**WHEREAS**, Sections 11 and 12 of the Highlands Act specifically require that the Regional Master Plan be comprised of (a) a Resource Assessment that seeks to determine the amount and type of human development and activity that can be sustained by the Highlands Region's ecosystem while maintaining the Region's overall ecological values; (b) a Financial Component that details the costs of implementing the Regional Master Plan, and details the sources of revenue for covering those costs; (c) a Local Participation Component that provides for the maximum feasible local government and public input; (d) a Coordination and Consistency Component that details the ways in which local, State, and federal programs and policies may be best coordinated to promote the goals, purposes, policies, and provisions of the Regional Master Plan; (e) a Transportation Component that provides a plan for transportation system preservation; (f) a Smart Growth Component that assesses opportunities for appropriate development, redevelopment, economic growth and a transfer of development rights program, and includes a Land Use Capability Map; (g) a Land Use Capability Map for the Preservation Area and a comprehensive statement of policies for the development and use of land in the Preservation Area; and (h) a statement of policies, including a preservation zone element that identifies zones within the Preservation Area where development shall not occur in order to protect water resources and environmentally sensitive lands and which shall be permanently preserved through use of a

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variety of tools, including but not limited to land acquisition and the transfer of development rights and minimum standards governing municipal and county master planning and development regulations; and

**WHEREAS**, after a careful analysis of the best available scientific and planning data and consultation with State, federal and local agencies pursuant to the Highlands Act, the Highlands Council adopted Resolution 2008-27 approving the Regional Master Plan on July 17, 2008 and, pursuant to the Highlands Act requirement for gubernatorial review, the Regional Master Plan thereafter became effective on September 8, 2008; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Act creates a bifurcated system for municipal conformance with the Regional Master Plan – mandatory Plan Conformance for any portion of a municipality located wholly or partially in the Preservation Area and voluntary Plan Conformance for the municipalities with lands wholly in the Planning Area or for any portion of a municipality lying within the Planning Area; and

**WHEREAS**, Section 14 of the Highlands Act expressly requires mandatory Plan Conformance where municipalities, located wholly or partially in the Preservation Area, must revise and conform their local master plans and development regulations, as they relate to development and use of land in the Preservation Area, with the goals, requirements and provisions of the Regional Master Plan within 15 months of adoption thereof, or December 8, 2009; and

**WHEREAS**, Section 15 of the Highlands Act provides for voluntary Plan Conformance where any municipality located wholly or partially in the Planning Area may voluntarily revise and conform its local master plan and development regulations, as they relate to the development and use of land in the Planning Area, with the goals, requirements and provisions of the Regional Master Plan at any time; and

**WHEREAS**, pursuant to Sections 14 and 15 of the Highlands Act, the Highlands Council shall approve, reject, or approve with conditions the revised plan and development regulations, as it deems appropriate, after public hearing, within 60 days after the date of submission thereof; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Act provides that an approval of a Petition for Plan Conformance entitles the conforming municipality with specific benefits including: planning grants, technical assistance, state aid, priority for projects, tax stabilization funds, a strong presumption of validity and extraordinary deference in the event of legal challenge, and legal representation; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Council approval of Resolution 2008-27 adopting the Regional Master Plan included the adoption of the Highlands Plan Conformance Guidelines that outline the procedures, schedule, planning assistance, and benefits available for the submission of a Petition for Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, the Plan Conformance Guidelines provide a process for Plan Conformance requiring the submission of plans and regulations that are immediately necessary to ensure protection of Highlands resources and resource areas, with more complex tasks to be completed in accordance with an Implementation Plan and Schedule as a condition of Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, Section 18 of the Highlands Act obligates the Highlands Council to establish a grant funding program to reimburse municipalities for reasonable expenses associated with Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, on December 18, 2008, the Highlands Council approved Resolution 2008-73 to provide grant funding for the Highlands municipalities to cover the reasonable expenses associated with revisions to master plans, development regulations or other regulations to conform them to the Regional Master Plan; and

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**WHEREAS**, under Resolution 2008-73, the Highlands Council authorized the Executive Director to develop and implement a process for the solicitation and distribution of the Plan Conformance Grants in a total amount not to exceed \$7.5 million and up to \$100,000 allocation for each individual municipality for Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, the Bylaws of the Highlands Council authorize the Executive Director, as chief administrative officer, to approve contracts and issue payments up to \$25,000; and

**WHEREAS**, as directed, the Executive Director developed the Plan Conformance Grant Program, a program that splits Plan Conformance into the following seven steps or modules for administering the authorized grant funding: (1) and (2) Highlands Municipal Build-Out Analysis and Report; (3) Housing Element and Fair Share Plan; (4) Highlands Environmental Resource Inventory; (5) Master Plan Highlands element; (6) Highlands Area Land Use Ordinance; and (7) Municipal Petition for Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, in the Township of Vernon, 29,305 acres are in the Preservation Area and 15,464 acres are in the Planning Area; and

**WHEREAS**, on December 8, 2009, the Township of Vernon submitted a Petition for Plan Conformance including a resolution adopted by the Governing Body seeking Plan Conformance for all lands lying in the Preservation Area; and

**WHEREAS**, on March 16, 2010, the Executive Director deemed the Petition for Plan Conformance administratively complete, and on February 1, 2010 posted the Petition documents on the Highlands Council website and thereafter commenced staff review of the Petition for consistency with the Regional Master Plan; and

**WHEREAS**, on February 3, 2012, the Executive Director provided the Township of Vernon with a Draft Consistency Review and Recommendations Report, which provides the staff's assessment of the Petition for Plan Conformance, the level of conformance with the Regional Master Plan, and recommendations for any further actions necessary for Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, the Executive Director provided the Township of Vernon with a deliberative municipal response period allowing the Township of Vernon to review and respond to the Draft Consistency Review and Recommendations Report; and

**WHEREAS**, on April 13, 2012, the Executive Director completed the Final Draft Consistency Review and Recommendations Report, and posted a Public Notice, the Final Draft Consistency Review and Recommendations Report, and the complete Petition documents on the Highlands Council website for a public review and comment period with written comments due on or before April 30, 2012; and

**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Implementation Plan and Schedule includes a detailed accounting of the existing Plan Conformance Grants and the allocation of additional grant funding in order to address the Highlands Act requirements for Plan Conformance funding; and

**WHEREAS**, on May 11, 2012, the Executive Director posted the Final Consistency Review and Recommendations Report and Highlands Implementation Plan and Schedule on the Highlands Council website, which addressed issues raised during the public comment period; and

**WHEREAS**, on May 17, 2012, the Highlands Council held a public hearing on the Township of Vernon's Petition for Plan Conformance and provided an opportunity for public comment; and

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**WHEREAS**, the Highlands Council accepts the recommendation of the Executive Director as stated in the Final Consistency Review and Recommendations Report; and

**WHEREAS**, according to the Highlands Act and the Plan Conformance Guidelines, the Township of Vernon's compliance with an approved Final Consistency Review and Recommendations Report, the Highlands Implementation Plan and Schedule, the Highlands Plan Conformance Guidelines and the Highlands Act shall maintain the Township of Vernon's status as conforming to the Regional Master Plan and all statutory benefits associated with Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, the Plan Conformance Guidelines provide that no amendment to the master plan or development regulations applicable to the development and use of land in the Township of Vernon shall be effective until the Township of Vernon has submitted such amendment to the Highlands Council and such amendment has been found by the Council to be in conformance with the Regional Master Plan, or the Executive Director has notified the Township of Vernon that such amendment does not affect the Highlands Council's prior finding of Plan Conformance; and

**WHEREAS**, the Plan Conformance Guidelines provide that following the receipt of any amendment to the Township of Vernon's master plan or development regulations, the Executive Director is required to determine whether or not the amendment raises a substantive issue with respect to the conformance of the municipal master plan or development regulations with the Regional Master Plan, and

**WHEREAS**, the Plan Conformance Guidelines provide that if the Executive Director determines no such substantive issue is raised with respect to an amendment, the Executive Director shall certify such fact and notify the Clerk of the Township of Vernon and the Highlands Council, and shall provide notice on the Highlands Council website, and such amendment shall thereupon take effect in accordance with its terms and applicable law; and

**WHEREAS**, the Plan Conformance Guidelines provide that if the Executive Director determines that an amendment raises a substantive issue with respect to the conformance of the municipal master plan or development regulations to the Regional Master Plan, the amended municipal master plan or development regulations shall be reviewed in accordance with the Plan Conformance Guidelines; and

**WHEREAS**, pursuant to N.J.S.A. 13:20-5.j, no action authorized by the Highlands Council shall have force or effect until ten (10) days, Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays excepted, after a copy of the minutes of the meeting of the Council has been delivered to the Governor for review, unless prior to expiration of the review period the Governor shall approve same, in which case the action shall become effective upon such approval.

**NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the Highlands Council hereby approves the Township of Vernon's Petition for Plan Conformance with conditions as set forth in the Final Consistency Review and Recommendations Report and the Highlands Implementation Plan and Schedule; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Highlands Council hereby approves the Township of Vernon's Highlands Implementation Plan and Schedule including the reallocation of the existing Plan Conformance Grant and the allocation of additional grant funding to pay for the reasonable expenses incurred to complete the priority Plan Conformance conditions; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Executive Director is authorized to make any amendments and publicly release the Final Consistency Review and Recommendations Report, Highlands Implementation Plan

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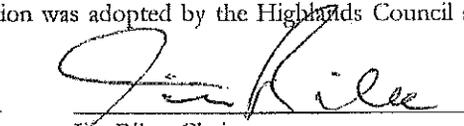
and Schedule, and amend the Plan Conformance Grant Agreement consistent with direction from the Highlands Council, to properly effectuate the intent of the Council and to execute the Report, Schedule and Grant Agreement on behalf of the Council; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the Township of Vernon is hereby entitled to the statutory benefits associated with Plan Conformance as detailed in the Highlands Act, the Regional Master Plan and the Plan Conformance Guidelines, so long as the Township of Vernon remains in conformance with the Regional Master Plan and to the extent such funds are made available by the State; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, the Executive Director is authorized, consistent with direction from the Highlands Council, to oversee and monitor the Township of Vernon's compliance with this Resolution and to take any and all action necessary in coordination with the Highlands Council to effectuate it.

**CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was adopted by the Highlands Council at its regular meeting held on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of May, 2012.

  
 Jim Rilee, Chairman

Vote on the Approval of This Resolution	Motion	Second	Yes	No	Abstain	Absent
Councilmember Alstede			✓			
Councilmember Carluccio			✓			
Councilmember Dougherty			✓			
Councilmember Dressler			✓			
Councilmember Francis			✓			
Councilmember Holtaway			✓			
Councilmember James			✓			
Councilmember Menguucci			✓			
Councilmember Richko	✓		✓			
Councilmember Sebetich			✓			
Councilmember Tfank			✓			
Councilmember Visioli			✓			
Councilmember Vohden		✓	✓			
Councilmember Walton			✓			
Chairman Rilee			✓			